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FRANZ GRILLPARZER: CRITIC OF MUSIC

By PHILIP GORDON

THE greatest of Austrian dramatists, Franz Grillparzer, is one of the most instructive of music critics. Born in the year of Mozart's death and Meyerbeer's birth (1791), he lived to see the triumphs of Wagner. His comments during the eighty-one years of his life on the art which thrilled his every fibre far more than did the sister art in which he performed his great work are, in the first place, a register of the attitude of Vienna toward certain phases of musical development, and, in the second place, a store of interesting and instructive criticism.

Let us first speak of Grillparzer himself. "To forget that Grillparzer was a musician," says his biographer, Ehrhard, "is equivalent to forgetting that Michelangelo was a poet or that Goethe was a scientist. The place which music occupied in his life and works was so large, his passion for the art and the manner in which he enjoyed it were so typical of his time and his country, that it is impossible to pass lightly over this important and significant phase of his activity."

In Vienna Grillparzer found a favorable environment for his strong natural gift for music, a gift so strong that a single detached tone made him tremble involuntarily. The musical nature had long been in the family; Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Cherubini were its distinguished guests; the poet's mother came of a house which was the center of musical activity in Vienna during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Christoph Sonnleitner, her father, dean of the faculty of jurisprudence in the University of Vienna, was a friend of Haydn and Mozart. His son, Joseph Sonnleitner, was one of the founders of the *Gesellschaft der Wiener Musikfreunde* and collaborator in the libretto of Beethoven's "Fidelio"; he discovered the manuscript in neume notation of the famous Antiphonary of St. Gallen. Anna Sonnleitner, the poet's mother, was a noted pianiste of remarkable talent; she gave to her son the "delicate, even morbid sensitiveness..., the wealth of imagination..., the tendency to dreaming" which made music the only element in which he found his needs satisfied. A short poem of his in praise of music concludes thus: "Ignoring the individual, it reveals the sum of the universe."

But despite his broad view of the function of music, Grillparzer had very definite views of the proper method of exercising that function. It was his claim that a poem may express as many emotions as the poet pleases; the imagination may be given free rein; but a piece of music must contain only one idea, a single germ developed into a piece of incomparable beauty. Furthermore, music must not seek to give expression to a tangible emotional idea; it is an art which deals with the emotions only vaguely, since it must rise above earthly things, it must "begin where poetry ceases."

This theory was shaped and strengthened by three great forces: Mozart, Kant, Vienna. Grillparzer's training in music had begun and ended with Mozart; he had absorbed the works of the master and had become imbued with his art. It is known that the sounds of a Mozart symphony brought back to his mind the plan of his "Golden Fleece," which he had forgotten.

Now there is perhaps no other composer who has attained that Hellenic freedom and disinterestedness which Kant makes the greatest attribute of art. Grillparzer's aesthetics of music reflects the influence of Kant on his thought in the following lines: "The only art which seeks no other end than itself; it is play even when it is serious. Evading itself, it attains itself; ever on the wing, it entwines itself in its own chains, and breaks them, and is again free as the other arts."

Finally, and this shows that Grillparzer was a Viennese, he believed the composer bound by demands to which the poet is a stranger. Because the composer reaches the soul only by an appeal to the senses, and not through the intellect, music must avoid everything harsh. "Shakespeare could employ the horrible; Mozart's limit was the beautiful." This thesis will explain Grillparzer's antagonism to the Romanticists.

Such, in brief, was the poet's philosophy of music. His greatest delight—and here again we see his city reflected in him—was the dance. "The dance is rhythm turned into flesh and blood... The most perfect, the most beautiful the visible world possesses, the human body, corporealizes in plastic mold the impalpable, fleeting form. The world would owe to its dancers one of its finest aesthetic pleasures if the ballet were what it ought to be."

Music that was unlike Mozart's was, needless to say, likely to incur Grillparzer's wrath. He was not ashamed of this partiality. "That music sings my youth; it contains all that I have felt in the best years of my life. Therefore no other music can appeal to me." The finest lines ever written on Mozart are from Grillparzer's pen:

Dem grossen Meister in dem Reich der Töne,
 Der nie zu wenig tat und nie zu viel,
 Der stets erreicht, nie überschritt sein Ziel,
 Das mit ihm eins und einzig war: das Schöne!

(To the great master in the realm of music, who never did too little, never too much; who always attained, never stepped beyond his goal, which was solely and entirely the beautiful.)

Among the frequent visitors at the Sonnleitner home was a young man, Franz Schubert. "Prometheus," the "Gesang der Geister über den Wassern," and the "Twenty-third Psalm" were among the works which he offered for performance at the Sonnleitner musicales. The poet conceived a great fondness for Schubert and for his music, in which he seemed to find, perhaps not without some basis, the continuation of the Mozartian ideal. When the unfortunate composer died, his friend Grillparzer was asked to write his epitaph. The simple lines have become famous:

Der Tod begrub hier einen reichen Besitz,
 Aber noch schönere Hoffnungen.
 Hier liegt Franz Schubert
 Geboren am 31. Jänner, 1797
 Gestorben am 19. November, 1828
 31 Jahre alt.

(Death buried here a rich treasure, but still fairer hopes. Here lies Franz Schubert. Born January 31, 1797. Died November 19, 1828. Thirty-one years old.)

Most emphasized of all is the friendship between Grillparzer and Beethoven. This friendship is very interesting and enlightening, though it had little influence on the lives of the two artists. In 1809 the poet wrote in his diary: "I have often wanted to compare our composers with the Creation. Chaos: Beethoven. 'Let there be light': Cherubini. Mountains (great clumsy things): Haydn. . The human being: Mozart." It is not a very flattering opinion of Beethoven; but it was modified in time, and at any rate it did not prevent the two men from getting on together very well.

In his "Reminiscences of Beethoven" the poet relates some little known incidents in the master's life. Some are worth translating.

"The first time I saw Beethoven was in my youth; it must have been in 1804 or 1805.... He was then still thin, dark, and—contrary to his later custom—most elegantly dressed. He wore spectacles, which I recall all the more because in later years he

gave up this aid to his shortsightedness.... Abbé Vogler sat down at the piano and began an endless string of variations on an African theme, which he himself had imported.... Ultimately only Cherubini and Beethoven were left. At length the former went out also, leaving Beethoven alone beside the hard-working Abbé. Finally he too lost patience; but Vogler, left entirely alone, did not cease to caress his theme in all possible forms."

"One or two years later I spent the summer with my parents in the village of Heiligenstadt, just outside Vienna. Our rooms looked toward the garden; Beethoven had rented those facing the street. My brother and I paid no attention when the eccentric man (he had grown stronger in the last year, but he now dressed very carelessly) stormed past us; but my mother, a passionate lover of music, used to go out before our door and listen devoutly to his playing. Suddenly one day Beethoven's door opened, the master came out, saw my mother, hurried back again and rushed out of the house.... He remained implacable and left his piano untouched until the autumn brought us back to the city."

"In one of the following years I paid frequent visits to my grandmother, who had a summer home in the suburb of Döbling. Beethoven was then also living in Döbling. From my grandmother's windows you could see the dilapidated house of a certain farmer Flehberger, well known for his slovenly habits. This Flehberger possessed, in addition to his miserable shack, a very beautiful daughter Liese, whom, however, reputation had not especially favored. Beethoven seemed to take a great interest in the girl. I still see him coming up Stag Lane, his white handkerchief, sweeping the ground, in his right hand, until he stopped before Flehberger's gate.... I never saw him speak to her; he stood there silently and looked into the yard until at length the girl, either by making fun of or by stubbornly ignoring him, awakened his anger. Then he turned away quickly and stormed off—not neglecting next time to stop again before the farmer's gate. Beethoven's interest went so far that once, when the girl's father had been put into the town prison for his part in a drunkards' brawl, he advocated the man's release before the community council, treating the severe gentlemen so roughly that he came near being obliged to lend his protégé his involuntary companionship."

In 1823, when Grillparzer had made a name for himself with the trilogy, "The Golden Fleece," Beethoven requested the poet to write him a libretto. Grillparzer demurred for a time, for he

did not endorse Beethoven's stormy, emotional symphonies, but he finally wrote a libretto on the Melusina story (ultimately set by Konradin Kreutzer). It was in the style of the Italian opera of which Grillparzer was so fond, and Beethoven found after a while that he could do nothing with it. Large choruses, scenic effects, idyllic outgushings of romantic sentimentality—all these were nothing to Beethoven. But he seems to have wished to spare the poet's feelings, and so he kept putting off the work with all sorts of excuses.

In the summer of 1823 Grillparzer visited the composer in the country. The great man was now quite deaf. There have been preserved the books in which his visitors wrote their share of their conversations with him. In one place Grillparzer wrote: "I have wondered whether each entrance of or even association with Melusina could not be designated by an ever-recurring melody, short, soft, and enticing?" It is most unfortunate that we do not know Beethoven's answer to this suggestion of the leit-motiv. (This was probably the first written statement of the idea, though Hérold had used it in "*La Clochette*" in 1817.)

Farther on we meet two statements which show that Grillparzer, although he was opposed to Beethoven's style realized the fault was to some extent his own. "If one but knew what you think in your music!" he writes; and later: "Your music remains perfectly incomprehensible to us."

There is also some grim humor in their conversations. Both men were bachelors, and Beethoven seems to have said that he intended to remain unmarried. "Quite right!" answered the poet; "the intellects among women have no figures, and the figures have no intellects." ("*Die Geister haben keine Leiber, und die Leiber haben keine Geister.*")

They met for the last time in 1826. For the poet it was the gloomiest of periods; his engagement to Kathe Froelich had been broken off, and he felt embittered against the whole world. Beethoven did his best to cheer him—imagine the picture!—and tried to interest him in the implications of the contemporary trend of musical thought, which Beethoven followed with much concern. "Weber used four horns," he said. "What is all this coming to?"

"Later I saw him," we read in the "*Reminiscences*," "only once again. He said at that time: 'Your opera is finished.' Whether he meant that it was finished in his mind or that the innumerable note books in which he used to jot down ideas and figures for future reworking contained the elements of the opera,

I do not know.... I did not see him again until, dressed in black and carrying a burning torch, I accompanied his coffin to the grave.

"Two days before, Schindler had come to me with the news that Beethoven was dying and that his friends wanted me to write a funeral address to be spoken by the actor Anschütz at his grave.... I had come to the second part of the oration, when Schindler came again and told me that Beethoven had just died. Then something snapped inside me; the tears rushed from my eyes, and I could not finish the speech as elegantly as I had begun. However, the address was made; the company left deeply moved; and Beethoven was no longer with us!

"I had really loved Beethoven. If I can recall only little of his talk, it is because I am interested in what an artist does rather than in what he says."

Excerpts from this oration, delivered March 29, 1827, are well worth quoting, though any translation must be quite inadequate: "For he was an artist; and what he was, he was through art alone. Deeply had the thorns of life wounded him; and as the storm-tossed sailor yearns toward the land, so he sought thy bosom, thou sublime sister of goodness and of truth, comforter of the suffering, heaven-born Art. Firm he held to thee, and even when the door was barred through which thou didst enter and speak to him, he bore ever thy image in his heart, and when he died it still dwelt in his breast.

"He was an artist; and who shall stand beside him? Even as the behemoth sweeps through the seas, so he swept through the realms of his art.... Who comes after him will not follow him; he will have to begin anew, for his predecessor left off only where art ceases....

"He was an artist, but also a man—a man in every, in the highest sense. Because he secluded himself from the world, they thought him malevolent; and because he avoided sentiment, they thought him incapable of feeling.... He fled from the world because in all his nature he could find no weapon with which to oppose it. He shunned mankind after he had given it his all and received nothing in return. He lived alone because he found none other like himself. But his heart ever beat in friendship to man, in love to his relatives.

"Such was he in life—such in death—such will he live unto all time."

In the autumn of the same year the famous monument in Heiligenstadt was unveiled, and Grillparzer again wrote the ora-

tion. "He who lies here was a man inspired. Striving toward one goal, filled with one aim, enduring all for one cause, sacrificing all for one hope—thus he went through life. He knew neither wife nor child, seldom joy, and rarely pleasure."

Perhaps all this seems to fit badly with Grillparzer's opinion, "Beethoven: Chaos." There is no doubt that Grillparzer's respect and love for Beethoven grew despite the difference in their views. He did not understand Beethoven; and he admitted it. Yet he felt his great worth, as is evident from the funeral oration. He felt the master's power, and when he forgot his favorite Mozart—as he certainly did for a while when Beethoven died—he praised the master's work. But it is hard to change the impressions rooted in one's mind since childhood. Mozart was all the world to Grillparzer; Beethoven was an anomaly, a rare power whose charm he had no strength to resist, no matter how hard he tried. And as he felt, so Vienna felt. When Beethoven had no rivals, he was the idol of the Viennese. But as soon as the Italian opera of Rossini came to town they responded to an inherent impulse and flocked to the new standard. They ridiculed a now forgotten critic who dared to believe that some day "Fidelio" would be as popular as "Tancred."

Obviously the nature of the Viennese taste was to cost that metropolis its prestige. Its fate was decided in the great battle between the Romantic and the Italian opera. Vienna was known as a city loving music to distraction. It was the acknowledged superior of Berlin; and it was here that the war raged for more than ten years.

It will be remembered that Gluck had tried to effect his reform of the opera in Vienna. But the southern influence had been too strong; a clear, light, attractive melody was what music meant to the Viennese. Emotions were of no consequence; neither was dramatic content. Music was food for the senses. Whoever knows Vienna will appreciate how essentially this feeling was part and parcel of the ancestral nature of these people. Gluck was obliged to betake himself and his ideas to Paris, where the French received him favorably.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century a revulsion of feeling had seized Vienna, and Méhul, Cherubini, and Boïëldieu were favorites. Hence comes Grillparzer's opinion: "Let there be light: Cherubini." But in 1819 an Italian opera troupe came to Vienna with "Tancred." In a little while Rossini himself, one of the laziest men who ever lived, was obliged to come to Vienna to feed the popular stomach.

The other camp did not keep silent. The Romantic opera was essentially a product of northern Germany, and men might have known that the taste of the south was entirely different from that of Berlin. But Vienna was the metropolis, and music could attract no attention unless performed there. So thither went the reformers.

This, then, was the issue: Is opera to consist of expressive dramatic music, closely coördinated with the words; or is the opera to be food for the ear, regardless of emotions and action? Is its course to be determined by Hoffmann and Weber; or is Rossini to reign supreme? Time has decided for the former; Vienna decided for the latter.

In this bitter struggle the Romanticists (called at the time derogatively the "Germans") found no fiercer antagonist than Grillparzer. "Poetry and music cannot be combined," he said again and again; "the one appeals to the intellect, the other to the senses." This is, to be sure, a rather narrow view; but in one place he touched on a problem which is still engaging the attention of musical thinkers. "When music tries to degenerate into fitting itself to the sentiments of poetry, it ceases to be music; it gives up its place as the most potent of the arts to ape the functions of a lesser art." Grillparzer was attacking here primarily the thesis of the advocates of the new opera, a thesis which had found expression in the preface to Gluck's "*Alceste*" and was to find expression again in the writings of Wagner. They held that the drama was of more significance in the opera than was the music. To be sure, neither Gluck nor Weber nor Wagner lived up to that thesis in practice, even though the music of the music drama has always, if composed by a great master, supported and enhanced admirably the dramatic and æsthetic significance of the text. But when there arose, only a few years ago, composers whose texts were actual plays, there were and still are a goodly number of critics who felt that in their work music has degenerated into the ape of a lesser art. So much digression to show that Grillparzer was not a mere crank or fool in this controversy.

The vials of Grillparzer's wrath were emptied chiefly on Weber. There is no doubt that he drove his objections too far. What he says of Weber at times is simply the result of blind antagonism. But at other times he defends ably his claim that the horrible has no place in music. We have come by now to realize that even the horrible, if artistically employed, is good art. Grillparzer admitted that willingly enough in poetry, but not in music. Hence comes his satire on the scene of the casting

of the bullets in Weber's "Freischütz." The repetition of such words as *horrible* and *fearful* throughout the satire is intended to make the point of attack more apparent. The complete text follows in translation:

(A forest ravine. So dark that you cannot see your own hand. Thunder unceasing. All sorts of discord. Four devils with fiery eyes hang suspended from the wings as lanterns. SIROCCO, the Wild Huntsman, enters amid thunder and lightning. Gnashes his teeth and roars horribly.)

SIROCCO: Murder! death! poison! daggers! hell! fiends!
(Thunder increases.)

Abracadabra! Hokus-pokus! GODBEWITHUS, appear! *(Forty strings scrape away unisono without stopping.)*

Appear!! *(Twenty kettle drums join in.)*

Appear!!! *(Horrible peal of thunder.)*

He does not come. *(Seeing the faithful ECKART groveling on the ground.)* Ha! it is your fault that my lord and master does not appear! *(Beats him with a whip; ECKART yells horribly.)*

But I smell his approach. *(An intolerable stench spreads through the theatre.)*

Hear me, most awful one! *(Ten wild steers race across the stage.)* Ugh! horrible! *(Fifty grenadiers enter, load their muskets, and take aim at the audience, thereby routing those who are not already out of their wits. N.B.: Before this, all the exits must be locked.)* I do herewith blaspheme the Lord—curse myself—murder myself—damn myself—everyone—everything! *(The highest gallery falls with a fearful crash; the injured yell horribly.)*

IT IS ACCOMPLISHED! *(Fire breaks out behind the scenes. Thunder. Curtain falls.)*

In all probability everybody will understand the elements in the play which Grillparzer is satirizing. The wild steers are really in the opera. Samiel, the Wild Huntsman, is here called Sirocco and is made to invoke a devil greater than himself. The words "it is accomplished" are at the end of the scene in the opera.

Grillparzer's antagonism to the music of the Romanticists remained unchanged. Of Berlioz he said: "His motto is 'Foul is fair.'" Wagner, he stated emphatically in a poem, should have been thrown into prison for his music. Interesting in this connection is his satire on the overture to "Tannhäuser." It is in the form of a letter to the composer.

"Sir: I have heard the overture to 'Tannhäuser' and am delighted. That is—now; for during the listening my ears suffered to some extent. I noted at once that it was a matter not of pleasure for the ear, but of meaning and inner significance. This inner meaning I and some music-lovers sitting nearby, not knowing the title of the piece, could not make out. One thought the music pictured the Russo-Turkish war, the trumpets and trombones of the chorale delineating the death-defying courage of the Russians, and the trembling of the violins the fear of the Turks—though in truth the Turks did not seem to be very frightened. A second listener thought the piece dealt with the crash of a ship into an iceberg. Two others were reminded, one of the creation, the other of the destruction of the world. Finally, at the end of the overture, a kind gentleman gave us the composer's program. Then we saw it all, and we decided not to miss the second performance of this splendid overture. To be sure, an old man behind us thought it better to get the composer's meaning simply by reading the program, and to let the music go altogether; but who will pay any attention to people so far behind the times! Long live progress!"

Grillparzer wrote several little poems on Mendelssohn, Clara Wieck, Liszt, Paganini, and others of his contemporaries. One of the most charming is on Jenny Lind: "Here is not flesh—nor hardly tone; I hear thy soul."

In all these views Grillparzer was the mouthpiece of musical Vienna. The attitude of this great poet and critic and of his city, once the metropolis of the musical world, is not to be scorned as something silly. It has, if not a preponderance of merit, at least a fair portion of excuse. "He who knows thy power, oh Melody—!" exclaims Grillparzer. That is the key to the Viennese philosophy of music in the period we have surveyed.